Chapter 5: A Reflection on Issues of Power, Gender and Culture in Postgraduate Supervision

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Abstract

South African higher education institutions have seen a steady rise in postgraduate enrolments as part of a broader effort toward inclusive transformation. Despite this growth, challenges related to power dynamics, gender inequality, and cultural exclusion continue to shape the postgraduate supervision experience. This paper reflects on these systemic issues using a qualitative thematic analysis of secondary data to explore how postgraduate students navigate the complexities of supervision. The findings highlight that, although higher education is now more accessible in post-apartheid South Africa, many students, particularly those from historically marginalised backgrounds continue to face exclusionary practices that undermine their academic journeys. The study calls for inclusive supervision models, better institutional support systems, and policy reforms that acknowledge and address the realities of diverse postgraduate students. Additionally, the paper recommends the implementation of ongoing professional development for supervisors and the creation of collaborative, culturally responsive supervision practices. These measures are essential to redress power imbalances and ensure meaningful transformation in the postgraduate landscape.

Keywords: globalisation, power, postgraduate supervision, higher education, gender

Introduction

In the post-apartheid era, South Africa's higher education sector has undergone significant transformation, particularly in expanding access to postgraduate studies. However, despite these strides, postgraduate supervision remains a deeply contested space where power relations, gender inequality, and cultural tensions continue to undermine the academic experience for many students (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill 2020). This paper explores how these intersecting dynamics such as power, gender, and culture shape the experiences of postgraduate students, often in ways that reproduce exclusion and marginalisation within academic institutions. The supervision process is not merely a pedagogical activity; it is embedded within institutional cultures, historical legacies, and societal structures that influence who is included, who is supported, and who succeeds. For students from historically disadvantaged groups, including women, non-White students, and international students, supervision often reflects broader inequities rooted in colonial and patriarchal systems (IseOlorunkanmi *et al.* 2021). Understanding the implications of these structural dynamics is essential for transforming supervision into a more inclusive and equitable practice.

Gumede (2021) reveals that the transformation is a pertinent issue in the higher education sector in South Africa especially in the post-apartheid dispensation. Transformation within higher education was aimed at demolishing the barriers faced during apartheid so that higher education embraces inclusion and offers equal access to all students (Gumede 2021). Postgraduate education contributes to building and expanding knowledge by responding to both local and international challenges and providing solutions. Higher education institutions in South Africa have noted an increase in postgraduate enrolment. Student cohorts in higher education (HE) are rapidly diversifying in an era of massification and internationalisation (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill 2020). The calls for diversity in HE has increased dramatically over the past few years. The 2021 July unrest further solidified the need to embrace diversity as communities were fuelled by anger and tension transcending through the various diversity boundaries. This has heightened calls for intercultural communication, social cohesion, and diversity at educational institutions in order to address the broad range of diversity challenges. Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill (2020) argue that HE, however, is evolving at a slower rate than student cohorts are diversifying, and barriers faced by students are inequitable resulting in underserved groups facing greater challenges than their 'traditional' counter-

parts in achieving academic success. There is a need to meet the demands of the call for inclusive transformation in higher education. Keeping in mind that the postgraduate students entering higher education come from diverse backgrounds with varied needs.

This paper argues that a critical examination of power hierarchies, gender norms, and cultural expectations within postgraduate supervision is vital for advancing social justice in higher education. Drawing on Diversity Pedagogy Theory and using a reflective, qualitative lens, the discussion builds a case for rethinking supervision as a collaborative and culturally responsive practice and highlights the need for systemic change in the ways postgraduate students are supported and mentored in South African universities.

Calls for Transformation in Higher Education in South Africa

Vandeyar (2020) indicates that the statue of Cecil John Rhodes was the catalyst that sparked the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protest actions, which ignited national calls for decolonisation and structural reform in South African universities. In the wake of these movements, universities responded with urgency. A wave of curriculum transformation efforts swept across campuses, leading to the establishment of various structures such as the Curriculum Transformation Committee to drive institutional change. Academics were instructed to critically review and revise their course materials, including study guides, to reflect decolonial principles and epistemologies. This entailed the integration of African worldviews, gender-sensitive content, and the inter-rogation of Western-dominated knowledge systems (University of Cape Town 2022).

However, despite the symbolic and procedural shifts, a central concern remains: Are universities simply reforming surface-level policies while still failing to address the deeper systemic inequalities embedded in their institutional cultures? As Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill (2020) point out, increasing enrolment from historically marginalised groups does not automatically translate into equitable experiences or outcomes. If institutions do not adapt their pedagogical and supervisory models to meet the needs of a diverse postgraduate population, they risk reinforcing the very social divides they aim to dismantle.

To move beyond symbolic gestures, higher education institutions must re-evaluate the inclusivity of their teaching, supervision, and institutional practices. This involves designing responsive frameworks that affirm the cultural identities and lived experiences of all students, especially those from

previously disadvantaged backgrounds. Meaningful inclusion fosters not only academic success but also promotes social cohesion and institutional belonging. Mzangwa (2019) supports this view, noting that while post-apartheid higher education has expanded access, persistent concerns about participation, equity, and student support remain unresolved. Power imbalances continue to shape the postgraduate experience—particularly for first-generation students who are still navigating unfamiliar academic environments. Among these challenges, gender inequality remains a critical issue. Women in postgraduate education often face socio-cultural and institutional barriers that position them as inferior or unworthy of academic advancement, primarily due to patriarchal ideologies entrenched in society (Alabi, Seedat-Khan & Abdullahi 2019).

Majee and Ress (2020) argue that addressing these challenges requires a robust theoretical framework grounded in decoloniality, which interrogates the lingering effects of colonial power structures in knowledge production. Decoloniality, rooted in the struggles of colonised peoples, proposes alternative frameworks for understanding how systemic inequality operates in higher education. Yet, the growing momentum for decolonisation has sparked debate among academics, some of whom remain uncertain about its implications for disciplinary integrity and postgraduate output.

Franco *et al.* (2019) extend this discussion globally, suggesting that higher education needs a radical shift in policy and practice to align with the principles of Higher Education for Sustainable Development (HEfSD). Despite strong policy rhetoric, implementation gaps persist, and universities often struggle to translate decolonial and sustainability goals into actionable curricula. It is, therefore, imperative that higher education policymakers design targeted, inclusive policies that specifically address the lived realities and academic needs of postgraduate students especially those from marginalised gender, racial, and cultural groups.

Inclusive Education

According to Dalton *et al.* (2019), the concept of inclusive education first emerged in South African education policy during the post-apartheid period as a response to decades of systemic discrimination based on race, class, and gender. It was envisioned as a transformative framework intended to dismantle exclusionary practices and ensure that all students regardless of background could access and succeed within the education system. However, implement-tation has proven challenging. A 2016 study highlighted several persistent

barriers, including inadequate academic training on inclusive education, limited support structures in higher education, and weak engagement from education departments and communities (Dalton *et al.* 2019).

Although policies express a commitment to inclusion, the lived reality for many students suggests otherwise. Inclusive education often remains more aspirational than practical, especially within the postgraduate environment where structural inequalities continue to shape student experiences. This includes disparities in access to academic support, lack of cultural sensitivity in teaching and supervision, and persistent gender biases. For postgraduate students from marginalised backgrounds such as women, first-generation scholars, and students from rural or low-income communities. These issues can lead to feelings of alienation, disempowerment, and unequal opportunities for success.

Leisyte, Deem and Tzanakou (2021) argue that for higher education to be truly inclusive, institutions must move beyond a narrow focus on individual accommodations and instead develop strategies that address group-based disadvantages. This means acknowledging how systemic issues such as patriarchy, cultural hegemony, and epistemic injustice affect students' participation and success. Within the context of postgraduate supervision, inclusive education entails more than access to a supervisor or enrolment in a programme. It involves creating an enabling environment where students' diverse identities and intellectual contributions are recognised, valued, and supported throughout the research journey.

The connection between inclusive education and the themes of power, gender, and culture in postgraduate supervision is therefore fundamental. Supervisory practices that are not inclusive risk reproducing the very inequalities that educational policies claim to redress. Supervisors who lack training in inclusive pedagogy may unintentionally reinforce power hierarchies, ignore cultural differences, or fail to challenge gender norms further marginalising students who already face systemic barriers. In contrast, inclusive supervision creates spaces of empowerment, where knowledge production becomes a shared, respectful, and culturally responsive process.

Thus, fostering inclusivity in postgraduate supervision is a critical step toward achieving broader goals of equity and transformation in higher education. Institutions must invest in staff development, inclusive policy implementation, and monitoring mechanisms that ensure the principles of inclusive education are embedded within all supervisory relationships. Without these commitments, calls for transformation and decolonisation in higher education risk becoming rhetorical rather than structural.

Internationalisation

Internationalisation in higher education is a multifaceted concept that encompasses political, economic, sociocultural, and academic strategies aimed at integrating global dimensions into university teaching, research, and engagement. De Wit and Altbach (2021) note that internationalisation has evolved from a peripheral concern to a central reform agenda, with institutions seeking to enhance global competitiveness, expand research collaborations, and foster cross-cultural engagement. It is defined as 'the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education' (De Wit *et al.* 2015:29).

A key component of this agenda is the recruitment and integration of international students. These students, especially those from other African countries, are vital to the internationalisation strategy of many South African universities. They contribute to institutional research outputs, help build regional academic networks and diversify the learning environment by bringing multiple cultural perspectives into classrooms and research settings. Their enrolment often aligns with universities' goals of improving global rankings, accessing international funding, and fulfilling regional development objectives. However, while international students play a crucial role in realising the goals of internationalisation, their lived experiences often reveal a stark disconnect between institutional policies and student realities. Many international students face profound challenges in adapting to new academic, social, and cultural environments. Language barriers, lack of social support, xenophobia, and exclusion from informal academic networks contribute to a persistent sense of alienation. De Wit and Altbach (2021) caution that internationalisation can be reduced to a commodified export model, where the presence of international students is valued more for institutional gain than for genuine cross-cultural exchange or student development.

Carolissen and Kiguwa (2018) argue that this sense of being 'elsewhere' is a defining feature of the international student experience in South Africa. Without intentional efforts to foster inclusion and belonging, internationalisation risks becoming a symbolic exercise, benefiting the institution while marginalising the very students it relies on. This highlights the importance of reimagining internationalisation not just as a policy or strategy, but as a holistic practice that centres student wellbeing, academic support, and intercultural understanding.

Majee and Ress (2020) further assert that internationalisation policies

often prioritise economic and knowledge economy imperatives, overlooking the need for inclusive pedagogical practices. As a result, international students may struggle academically, with higher dropout and failure rates at the postgraduate level. A study in South Africa found that financial constraints and lack of support were significant factors contributing to higher dropout rates among international postgraduate students (Mphekgwana *et al.* 2020. These outcomes underscore the need for institutions to move beyond the rhetoric of internationalisation and actively cultivate learning environments where international students are supported, valued, and integrated into the academic community.

Marginalization and Exclusion

Lebelo (2021: 1) believes that 'the effects of marginalisation and exclusion can be seen not only physically but emotionally, psychologically, and socially'. Although a melting pot of cultures exist in South Africa, various issues of segregation occur by race, gender, ethnicity, tribalism, and social ranking which continues to separate students in the higher education sphere. Within a country like South Africa social inequalities are reflected historically in the higher education landscape due to the systematic exclusion of blacks and women because of apartheid and colonialism (Lebelo 2021). After 1994, within the post-apartheid era higher education was tasked with bringing about transformation and fostering social inclusion among the marginalised. Along with transformation, universities were also tasked with decolonisation which sought to abolish power relations and epistemologies of the colonial order and decolonial movements. Gumede (2021) adds that among the objectives of the White Paper for Higher Education was to promote equity of access and fair chances of success to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities; contribute to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship specifically addressing the varied challenges and demands of local and international contexts. In 2012 the Integrated Transformation Plans (ITPs) was adopted as a tool to support universities in developing an institutional social contract that would assist them in managing transformation.

Bhatti and Ali (2021) explain that higher education globally has increased focus on diversity, inclusion, and equity in leadership and management within the postgraduate sector. However, statistics show that issues of power, gender and culture are still visible in higher education. Akala (2018)

postulates that one of the key challenges in the South African transformation agenda is how to create a balance between gender, race, and social class.

Gender Inequality

Research shows that higher education is confronted with challenging the colonial impact and commodification of institutions of higher learning and the roles that these institutions play in societies as institutions continue to produce (Lebelo 2021. Mzangwa (2019) argues that discourse on equity and access are tied to the ideological and philosophical streams that define the values reflected in the educational system.

Alabi, Seedat-Khan and Abdullahi (2019) avow that the call for restructuring higher education with a focus on racial and gender equity has become a priority for key stakeholders in South Africa. Apartheid entrenched the notion of segregation and inequality among races in South Africa, which resulted in a gap between non-white and white; privilege and wealth was a reserve for white South Africans. Within a country like South Africa, women find themselves in this segregated predicament. Alabi, Seedat-Khan and Abdullahi (2019) argue that beyond apartheid, the underrepresentation of women in higher education is attributed to the socio-cultural dominant in patriarchal systems.

We live in an era where many women claim to be emancipated yet gender inequality is still very dominant is South Africa. Many organisations including universities are attempting to address this challenge. Akala (2018) argues that the segregated and gendered nature of education under the apartheid regime substantially submerged black women's position in society. The few women, who managed to rise above their patriarchal disadvantage to venture into education, received inferior education aimed at cementing their roles as nurturers and home keepers. Yet today more than 20 years later the gender gap in academia still exists. Socio-cultural, patriarchal beliefs and financial constraints are among the greatest barriers to women's successful participation and completion of postgraduate degrees. Within the African context, many still believe that a woman's place should be at home with the children and there is no need for higher education thus placing many African women at a disadvantage. This reiterates vital views prevalent in the existing literature on key factors impeding women's access and completion of postgraduate education (Alabi, Seedat-Khan & Abdullahi 2019. Many researchers have highlighted the systematic gender inequalities in Africa's higher education

which has been consistently emphasized the plight of African women who attempt to pursue postgraduate studies. There are various challenges female students face such as teenage pregnancy with many university students ending up pregnant whilst engaging in their studies and forced to drop out. The access to basic needs such as sanitary pads is another ongoing issue due to the high poverty and unemployment rate in South Africa. Clear attention must be given on ways to address gender, institutional cultures and administrative structures at South African universities. Carolissen and Kiguwa (2018) aver that due to the dispari-ties faced by postgraduate students, they face a challenge in finding their sense of belonging and risk alienation among peer students in the context of higher education in South Africa. The ongoing protests in South African higher educa-tion highlight the inequalities that students still face and conflicted with.

Carolissen and Kiguwa (2018: 3) state that black students within universities may already still feel marginalised and overwhelmed by western commodities being left with a sense of alienation especially with English referred to as a language of knowledge and power. Many South African is home to eleven official languages and students are challenged with the language bar-rier as English is not their first language, as many will speak in their native home language.

Gender inequality remains deeply entrenched in South African higher education, particularly within the realm of postgraduate supervision. While the intersection of race and gender is undeniable especially in a country still healing from the legacies of apartheid the core issue lies in how gender dynamics continue to disadvantage women, particularly black women, in academia. Postgraduate supervision is a site of power, mentorship, and academic identity formation. Yet, it often reflects broader systemic inequalities that position women, especially non-white women, at the margins. Alabi, Seedat-Khan, and Abdullahi (2019) argue that the persistent underrepresentation of women in higher education is not simply a residue of apartheid, but a result of patriarchal socio-cultural norms that continue to undervalue women's intellectual capacity and leadership potential. This manifests in supervision relationships where female students may receive less encouragement, fewer research opportunities, or limited access to professional networks compared to their male counterparts. The apartheid regime structured education in a racial and gendered manner, relegating black women to inferior education systems designed to reinforce their roles as homemakers rather than intellectual contributors (Akala 2018. Although apartheid has officially ended, its patriarchal ideologies persist.

Women who enter postgraduate programmes especially black women often do so despite cultural resistance, financial hardship, and institutional neglect. These conditions contribute to higher dropout rates and slower progression among female postgraduate students.

Gender inequality in postgraduate supervision is not only structural but also cultural. As Carolissen and Kiguwa (2018) note, postgraduate spaces are often alienating, particularly for black women who must navigate unfamiliar academic cultures dominated by Western epistemologies and male-centred norms. English, as the dominant language of instruction and research, further exacerbates exclusion, especially for those whose first language is not English. This linguistic gatekeeping often disadvantages women who are already negotiating multiple layers of marginality. While this discussion prioritises gender, it is critical to acknowledge how race intensifies gender inequality. As a non-white female academic, the experience of alienation is not simply due to gender alone, but also to the compounded effects of being black in historically white academic spaces. However, the central issue is that gender-based discrimination exists even among women across different races, suggesting that gender inequality operates independently and in tandem with racial inequities. Numerous challenges disproportionately affect female postgraduate students in South Africa: cultural expectations to prioritise family over career, teenage pregnancy, financial constraints, and even lack of access to basic necessities like sanitary pads (Alabi *et al.* 2019. These barriers reveal how gendered expectations and material disadvantages intersect to restrict women's academic success, often leading to delayed graduation or withdrawal from postgraduate study altogether.

Mzangwa (2019) rightly notes that equity and access are ideological issues that reflect the values of an education system. Thus, addressing gender inequality in postgraduate supervision requires a holistic transformation of institutional culture, supervision models, and support structures. Universities must interrogate their own practices, decolonise academic spaces, and create mentoring systems that actively support female students in navigating the postgraduate journey. While race remains a powerful determinant in shaping access and experience in higher education, gender inequality is a central issue that persists independently and often more pervasively within postgraduate supervision. By focusing on gender while acknowledging how race can exacerbate inequity we move closer to addressing the systemic, cultural, and interpersonal barriers that continue to hinder women's academic advancement in South Africa.

Institutional Culture

Institutional culture represents the values, attitude, styles of interaction, collective memories, and the way of life of the university known by those who work and study in the university environment through their lived experiences (Lebelo 2021. Institutional culture is often viewed as a core factor for the success of higher education transformation but is often the biggest obstacle to overcome.

Akala (2018) affirms that although there is overwhelming evidence indicating, women's representation has surpassed that of men, gender gaps are still evident. The factors that perpetuate gender inequalities among students are sexism, economic circumstances, social class, and cultural influences (Akala 2018. These patriarchal systems cut across race and culture. Although attempts have been made to alleviate the gender gap, it has proved unsuccessful. Students still find themselves fighting for recognition.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are not neutral spaces they reflect and reproduce the inequalities present in the broader society. While South Africa's universities attract international postgraduate students due to their relatively advanced research infrastructure and funding opportunities (IseOlo-runkanmi *et al.* 2021), these institutions also become sites were foreign nationals, especially African women, experience marginalisation. The challenges faced by international students such as xenophobia, cultural alienation, and lack of institutional support intersect with gender inequality to create multiple barriers to academic success.

Although xenophobia affects many international students, female foreign students face a compounded struggle. They are not only seen as 'outsiders' in a nationalistic sense but are also navigating patriarchal academic cultures. This dual burden can influence their access to supervision, mentoring, funding, and participation in academic networks. The socio-economic hostility described by IseOlorunkanmi *et al.* 2021) adds stress to their academic journey, making them more vulnerable to dropout, exploitation, or exclusion in supervision relationships.

Postgraduate supervision is often built on trust, open communication, and shared academic values. For international female students, especially those from other African countries, the experience of xenophobia within and outside HEIs erodes their sense of belonging, which is already fragile due to gender disparities. As Majee and Ress (2020) note, the belief among some Black South Africans that they are the rightful beneficiaries of transformation efforts may

result in subtle (or overt) exclusion of foreign nationals in opportunities and resources this includes academic support systems and fair treatment in supervision.

HEIs have a dual responsibility: (1) to offer quality education and research opportunities, and (2) to create inclusive, safe, and equitable environments for all students. When institutions fail to respond adequately to xenophobic sentiments or gender-based challenges, they become complicit in reinforcing inequality. The lack of institutional action against xenophobic practices or gender discrimination in supervisory relationships reveals gaps in transformation and decolonisation efforts within HEIs. The friction and resentment felt by Black South African students who perceive regional competitors for resources as undermining post-apartheid gains underscore the difficult balancing act higher education policymakers face when pushing for internationalisation alongside fulfilling social redress mandates (Majee and Ress 2020).

Dalton *et al*. 2019) avows that globally institutions of higher education are recognising their responsibilities to achieve the full inclusion of individuals with differing needs. There are groups of postgraduate students are vulnerable and are exposed to the harsh wrath of the so-called powerful supervisors who sometimes undermine the research skills of the marginalised groups of postgraduate students.

Power Relations between Supervisor and Student

Power dynamics between supervisors and postgraduate students are deeply embedded in the broader structures of higher education, particularly within South Africa's historically unequal system. Universities' increasing emphasis on attracting international postgraduate students to enhance research output (Majee & Ress 2020) often overshadows the urgent need for redress and equity for historically marginalised South African students. This strategic priori-tisation creates tension and resentment among Black South African students, who feel sidelined in the distribution of opportunities and resources. These institutional decisions are not neutral, they reflect and reproduce existing inequalities, which in turn shape supervisory relationships.

Within this unequal environment, postgraduate supervision becomes a key site where power is exercised and experienced. Supervisors, as gatekeepers of knowledge and academic progression, often operate from within their own cultural, epistemological, and disciplinary traditions (Grant, Hackney & Edgar

2014). This can create a disconnect between students—especially women and non-Western students—and their supervisors. For many female postgraduates, this disconnect is compounded by patriarchal academic cultures that question their presence, capability, and right to participate in knowledge production (Akala 2018; Alabi, Seedat-Khan & Abdullahi 2019).

Supervisors hold the authority to shape the student's academic journey, yet this authority can often translate into intimidation rather than empowerment. As Tsotetsi and Omodan (2020) note, the hierarchical nature of supervision can lead to harsh feedback and exclusionary practices that leave students feeling dehumanised and afraid to engage. Students may internalise these imbalances, leading to withdrawal, silence, or even dropout. When supervisors are frequently unavailable or fail to provide mentorship and emotional support, as observed by Cekiso *et al.* (2019) and Masek (2017), students are left to navigate complex academic demands without guidance, compounding feelings of isolation and helplessness.

These power relations are also shaped by broader cultural and structural challenges. For instance, female students may face additional pressures from patriarchal expectations at home and in society, alongside academic marginalisation. The lack of recognition for their lived realities, financial burdens, and the dominance of Western epistemologies in academic supervision all contribute to their alienation. Majee and Ress (2020) advocate for a decolonial perspective that challenges these entrenched hierarchies and fosters a more inclusive, dialogical learning environment, one where students from diverse backgrounds can feel seen, supported, and empowered. In essence, postgraduate supervision is not just an academic relationship, it is a cultural, political, and gendered space. Addressing the imbalances of power within this space is essential to creating a supervision culture rooted in empathy, equity, and mutual respect.

Theoretical Framework
Diversity Pedagogy Theory (DPT)
The Diversity Pedagogy Theory (DPT), as articulated by Sheet (2009), offers a critical lens for understanding the intrinsic relationship between culture and cognition, particularly in academic settings. At its core, DPT posits that effective teaching and supervision must intentionally acknowledge and incorporate students' cultural experiences, values, and knowledge systems into

learning processes. This theory is especially pertinent within the context of postgraduate supervision in South African higher education, where power imbalances, gender inequality, and cultural alienation remain key concerns.

In the postgraduate supervision context, DPT underscores the need for culturally inclusive supervision practices. Sheet (2009) maintains that culturally competent educators or in this case, supervisors must first observe students' behavioural and cultural patterns to understand the unique competencies and challenges each student brings. Second, they must use this knowledge to inform and adapt their supervisory approaches to better support student learning, motivation, and engagement. This aligns with Ngulube's (2021) view of postgraduate students as co-constructors of knowledge, who require meaningful academic guidance that is both responsive and inclusive.
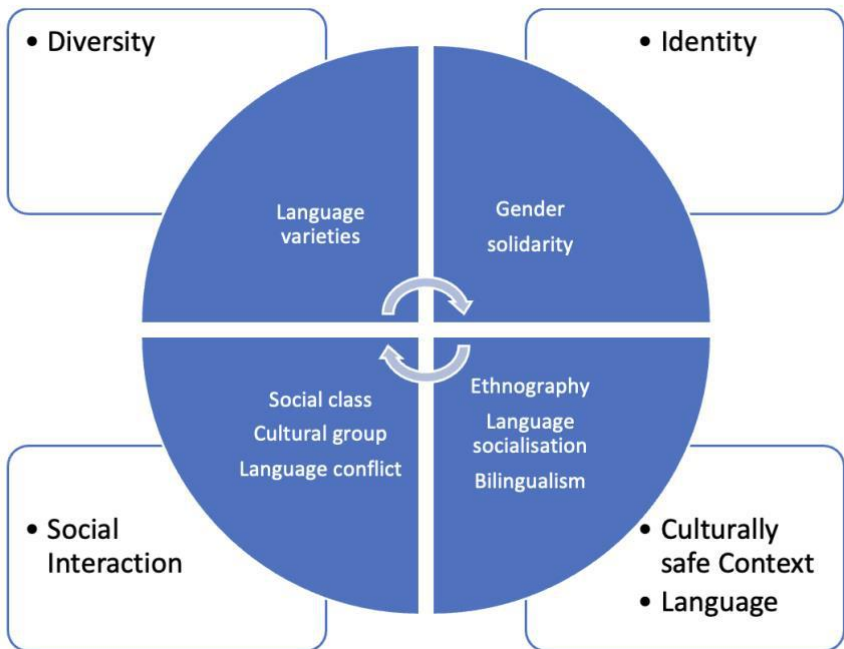
The postgraduate supervisory relationship is not culturally neutral; it is shaped by the supervisor's own epistemological and ontological worldview (Grant, Hackney & Edgar 2014. Many supervisors, often unknowingly, impose traditional academic norms that reflect Western, patriarchal, or elitist ideologies, marginalising students who do not conform to these dominant frameworks. This is especially true for Black women, first-generation scholars, students from rural communities, and those living with disabilities. In this regard, DPT serves as a tool to decolonise supervision by challenging academics to understand diversity not as an optional add-on, but as central to effective pedagogy and mentorship.

In line with Tsotetsi and Omodan (2020), who argue that many postgraduate students experience supervision as a site of intimidation and marginalisation, DPT encourages supervisors to adopt culturally responsive practices that create safe and empowering learning environments. This includes developing supervisory dispositions rooted in empathy, respect, and an awareness of power dynamics. Supervisors must acknowledge that students' gender identities, socio-economic backgrounds, and cultural affiliations significantly influence how they engage with research and respond to academic feedback.

Additionally, DPT is relevant to ongoing efforts in South African higher education to address structural inequalities and promote social justice. The theory aligns with the call by Alabi, Seedat-Khan, and Abdullahi (2019) to dismantle patriarchal and exclusionary academic norms that hinder women's access and success in postgraduate education. By centring students' diverse identities, DPT pushes academics to reframe supervision not just as a transfer

of knowledge but as a dialogical, culturally sensitive, and transformative process.

In summary, DPT provides a robust framework for addressing the power, gender, and cultural challenges inherent in postgraduate supervision. It equips academics with the tools to develop cultural competency, foster inclusive and equitable academic relationships, and ultimately contribute to the transformation of higher education in South Africa. In a system still grappling with the legacies of apartheid and colonialism, DPT offers a way forward where diverse student identities are affirmed, supported, and central to academic success.

The Diversity Pedagogy Theory (DPT) can assist in the following ways:

- Once academics are trained and mentored in actively utilising DTP in class, these culturally inclusive academics will be key agents in promoting cultural diversity and awareness, resulting in tolerance and inclusion of all students on and off campus.

- All stakeholders will be able to use their own epistemic views and work in a diverse environment without limiting diversity to only cultural and racial differences but rather a holistic approach that cuts across accepting one's sexuality, different socio-economic classes and persons living with disability.

- An organisation will be responsible for ensuring that all stakeholders are held accountable for ensuring they engage meaningfully in diversity in line with the diversity policy and culture that must be cultivated amongst all employees in HE and filters down to students.

- HE must customise its diversity management programme in relation to the institution and an assessment of institutional policies regarding these programmes must be done on an annual basis.

- Implement cultural competency initiatives along with diversifying staff and students.

Thematic Data Analysis

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, grounded in the interpretive paradigm. The interpretive lens was used to explore and reflect on the subjective experiences and systemic inequalities that shape postgraduate supervision in South African HEIs, with a particular focus on power, gender, and cultural dynamics. This research is based on secondary data collected through a desk-based literature review of recent scholarly articles, policy documents, and academic reports. The data was analysed using qualitative thematic analysis, to identify patterns and recurring themes across multiple sources. The findings revealed the following:

Theme 1: Power Imbalances in the Supervisory Relationship

Secondary data indicates that power dynamics between supervisors and students remain unequal and hierarchical. Tsotetsi and Omodan (2020) highlight that many postgraduate students experience dehumanisation through the harsh and unsupportive feedback styles of their supervisors. Supervisors often hold epistemic and institutional power that can lead to students feeling marginalised,

silenced, or fearful. Masek (2017) and Cekiso *et al.* 2019) further observe that a lack of supervisor availability and professionalism creates an environment where students are emotionally and academically unsupported. Power asymmetry can hinder the development of a supportive research culture, resulting in high dropout rates, delayed completion, and poor mental well-being among postgraduate students.

Theme 2: Gender Inequality in Postgraduate Education

Gender continues to be a significant barrier to equitable postgraduate supervision. Akala (2018) argues that the apartheid legacy and patriarchal norms submerged Black women's access to quality education. Women, particularly Black women, are underrepresented in higher education and often face subtle forms of discrimination in both access and supervision. Alabi, Seedat-Khan and Abdullahi (2019) stress that even in post-apartheid South Africa, socio-cultural norms continue to hinder women's participation in postgraduate education. Majee and Ress (2020) highlight tensions between redress efforts and the push for internationalisation, which can inadvertently disadvantage local women students. Patriarchal attitudes, caregiving burdens, and gendered role expectations contribute to unequal power dynamics in supervision and place women at a disadvantage in completing their postgraduate studies.

Theme 3: Cultural Alienation and Epistemic Exclusion

Many students, particularly from rural areas or other African countries, experience cultural alienation due to the dominance of Western knowledge systems and English as the language of instruction. Carolissen and Kiguwa (2018) note that Black students often feel alienated by the Western-centric institutional culture and language, which affects their sense of belonging. Majee and Ress (2020) argue that the university's focus on research output and internationalisation often overlooks the need to redress local epistemic injustices. The cultural disconnect between supervisors and students may result in limited academic expression, marginalisation of indigenous knowledge, and internalised academic inferiority, thereby affecting learning outcomes and research quality.

Theme 4: Lack of Culturally Responsive Supervision Practices

The literature suggests that many South African supervisors are not adequately trained in cultural competency. They often reproduce exclusionary practices that do not consider the diverse realities of their students. Sheets (2009) through Diversity Pedagogy Theory (DPT), emphasizes the need for supervisors to recognise cultural patterns and use these insights to inform their academic support strategies. The DPT framework proposes that effective learning environments must be rooted in understanding and valuing the cultural backgrounds of students. Supervision that is culturally blind or neutral contributes to academic alienation and disempowerment, particularly for Black, rural, or international students.

Theme 5: Institutional and Structural Barriers

Although South African universities have introduced transformation policies, there remains a disconnect between policy and implementation, particularly regarding inclusivity in supervision. Ngulube (2021) underlines the importance of supervisors in shaping postgraduate knowledge production and development. Dalton *et al.* (2019) point to the slow implementation of frameworks that support marginalised groups, including students with disabilities. Institutions need more than surface-level transformation. They require structural reforms that address supervisory training, accountability, and inclusive support systems tailored to diverse student needs.

This thematic analysis of secondary qualitative data reveals that postgraduate supervision in South African higher education is deeply shaped by interwoven issues of power, gender, and culture. Power asymmetries between student and supervisor, persistent gender biases, the marginalisation of local epistemologies, and the lack of culturally responsive pedagogy all contribute to inequitable postgraduate experiences.

Addressing these require:

- Supervisory training in cultural competency and gender sensitivity;
- Policy enforcement that holds supervisors accountable;
- The integration of African epistemologies and languages in the academic space; and
- Development of support systems for vulnerable groups including women and students with disabilities.

This reflection calls for a more transformative, decolonised, and inclusive model of postgraduate supervision, where all students regardless of background can thrive academically and professionally.

Discussion and Recommendations
Culture as a Cross-cutting Theme in Student Belonging and Engagement

Culture emerged as a central theme that intersects with religion, language, and identity in shaping student experiences. In South African HEIs, cultural diversity is often present but not fully integrated into pedagogical practice. Students from minority cultural groups often feel alienated, with curricula and supervisory practices not reflecting their lived realities (Vandeyar 2020). To create inclusive spaces, academics must adopt culturally responsive pedagogies that promote student voice and agency. As Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill (2020) suggest, this means positioning students as co-creators of knowledge, rather than passive recipients. This approach enhances student agency and engagement, making them active participants in shaping their educational journey. HEIs should invest in staff training on Diversity Pedagogy Theory (DPT), equipping supervisors to engage compassionately and critically with the cultural identities of their students.

Language and Epistemic Justice

The dominance of English as the primary language of instruction marginalises many African students. As Thomas and Maree (2021) argue, the incorporation of African languages into the postgraduate curriculum is essential for affirming identity and improving academic engagement. Language is not merely a communication tool but a carrier of epistemologies and ways of knowing. Institutions should gradually integrate multilingual approaches and explore bilingual supervision models, particularly in disciplines where indigenous knowledge systems are relevant.

Gender Inequity and the Experience of Marginalised Female Students

Gendered experiences significantly shape the postgraduate journey, especially

for women from underrepresented cultural or ethnic backgrounds. The lived narrative of being an Indian female student navigating exclusion highlights the intersectional barriers faced in academia, including stereotyping, marginalisation, and a lack of recognition. Research by Kumalo (2020) and Callaghan (2020) indicates that patriarchal power structures within postgraduate supervision often result in limited access to academic networks and mentorship for female students. Supervisory teams should be diversified by gender and cultural background, ensuring balanced representation and fostering a more inclusive academic environment. Institutional policies should enforce equitable distribution of supervision loads and mentorship opportunities.

Reimagining Supervision through Ubuntu and Student-centered Approaches

Findings from Tsotetsi and Omodan (2020) and Wood and Louw (2018) advocate for Ubuntu-inspired supervision, which emphasises shared humanity, relational accountability, and co-responsibility. This contrasts with the traditional model where supervision is often hierarchical and driven by individual academic authority. Ubuntu-based models promote mentorship, peer collaboration, and shared reflection, creating a supportive environment where students are encouraged to develop intellectual independence. Institutions should formalise team-based supervision models that promote mentorship, intercultural learning, and co-supervision across race, gender, and disciplines.

Postgraduate Student Support and Development

The sense of isolation frequently experienced by postgraduate students is a recurring theme in the literature (Lebelo 2021). A lack of peer interaction, minimal access to academic communities, and limited exposure to research networks contribute to high dropout rates. To mitigate this, establishing postgraduate peer groups and research clusters has been identified as a potential solution. These groups provide academic and emotional support and foster collaborative scholarship. Faculties should facilitate discipline-based postgraduate communities with opportunities for regular workshops, writing retreats, and peer-reviewed feedback. Orientation programmes should include detailed guidance on the research process, library resources, and academic writing tools.

Supervisor Training and Institutional Accountability

The quality of postgraduate supervision is often compromised by unequal workloads, lack of mentorship for novice supervisors, and unregulated supervisory practices. Albertyn and Bennett (2021) call for ongoing professional development to enhance supervisors' reflective capacity, intellectual humility, and non-directive mentoring skills. Moreover, some senior academics hoard supervision responsibilities, limiting opportunities for emerging scholars to engage in supervision and mentorship. HEIs should establish performance management systems that track supervisory quality and promote horizontal accountability, ensuring that students are not left unsupported. Institutional incentives should reward collaborative supervision and mentorship of junior academics.

In the post-apartheid context, South African higher education must move beyond performative transformation and implement substantive policy reforms that address cultural marginalisation, gender inequality, and power asymmetries in postgraduate supervision. Supervisors must be equipped with cultural competence, emotional intelligence, and a strong commitment to student development. Supervision should be reframed as a collaborative, intercultural, and developmental partnership, grounded in respect, inclusion, and mutual growth. Only through such transformation can postgraduate education become truly accessible, empowering, and just for all.

Conclusion

To achieve meaningful transformation in postgraduate education within South Africa, it is imperative that the voices of postgraduate students especially those from historically marginalised backgrounds are not only heard but are actively integrated into institutional policies and supervisory practices. Students must be seen as co-constructors of knowledge and collaborators in the academic journey, rather than passive recipients of instruction. One critical pathway to achieving this is through the creation of participatory platforms and forums where postgraduate students can openly express the challenges they face, particularly those rooted in power dynamics, gender inequalities, and cultural marginalisation (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill 2020; Vandeyar 2020).

These platforms should serve as both safe spaces for dialogue and feedback mechanisms that inform institutional reform. Without such engagement, the structural inequalities that persist in supervision relationships will continue to alienate students, contribute to high attrition rates, and

undermine the broader transformation agenda of higher education (Tsotetsi & Omodan 2020).

The plight of marginalised postgraduate students requires urgent attention from policymakers, whose interventions must go beyond surface-level inclusion to tackle systemic issues such as supervisor bias, epistemic injustice, and the often-unchecked power wielded by senior academics (Callaghan 2020; Kumalo 2020). Students from diverse racial, cultural, and gender identities often navigate an academic environment that fails to acknowledge their realities, and as such, policy must be responsive to these differentiated needs (Alabi, Seedat-Khan & Abdullahi 2019; Akala 2018).

Higher education institutions have a critical role to play in designing and institutionalising support systems that address the emotional, academic, and financial burdens of postgraduate study. These include mentoring programmes, inclusive curricula, mental health services, professional development for supervisors, and access to academic networks and conferences (Lebelo 2021; Albertyn & Bennet 2021). Such systems are not add-ons but essential infrastructure for postgraduate success and retention.

Furthermore, system-wide strategies are needed to dismantle the entrenched hierarchies and power imbalances within postgraduate supervision. Supervisors must be held accountable through transparent and structured performance frameworks that prioritise mentorship, equity, and student development (Wood & Louw 2018; Callaghan 2020). Institutions should promote horizontal accountability and collaborative supervisory models that distribute power and responsibility more evenly between student and supervisor (Tsotetsi & Omodan 2020; Kumalo 2020).

Policymakers must ensure that all strategies implemented are aligned with the specific institutional cultures and historical contexts in which postgraduate education occurs. A one-size-fits-all approach will not suffice. Instead, differentiated strategies that reflect the lived realities of students across various institutions rural, urban, historically disadvantaged or privileged must be pursued. As Leisyte, Deem and Tzanakou (2021) suggest, resolving the power imbalance requires deliberate, context-sensitive efforts to reconfigure the supervisor-student relationship into a positive, developmental partnership.

In conclusion, meaningful transformation in postgraduate supervision can only be realised through a holistic, equity-driven approach that centres student experience, addresses systemic inequalities, and reimagines supervision as a reciprocal, inclusive, and empowering process. It is time for higher education institutions and policymakers to move from rhetoric to concrete

action, ensuring that every postgraduate student has the opportunity not just to survive, but to thrive.

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